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The politicization of Mumsnet.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Contrary to popular opinion amongst some sections of Twitter, women do not lose the ability to think once they have had a baby. In fact, faced with the pure physical reality of precisely how much the world has been built to suit men, pregnancy and maternity is often the time when women become radicalised. With girls outperforming boys at school and university, and running neck and neck with them in the early stages of careers, many young women would be forgiven for assuming that gender equality has arrived and that there is no longer any need for feminism or women-focused political action. And then they have a baby.

Despite major advances since the fifties, motherhood means finding out about the cost of childcare – which in the UK is among some of the highest in Europe – and discovering that you will be judged for returning to work after the baby, and equally judged for not returning to work. You will be judged for not breastfeeding but also judged for breastfeeding for too long. You will be judged if your child is too active in public places (not enough discipline) and judged if your child is too passive (what is he afraid of?). Celebrity mothers' bodies "snap back into shape" hours after giving birth, so you will be judged if yours does not do the same, despite a lack of access to personal trainers and dieticians. As the saying goes, "A mother's place is in the wrong".

On a more sobering note, becoming a mother is still a dangerous enterprise. The World Health Organization tells us that, every day in 2017, 810 women died from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. The major complications that account for 75% of these deaths are severe bleeding, infection, high blood pressure, delivery complications and unsafe abortion.

Then there are the assumptions that will be made about you, particularly about your interests in anything outside your baby's nursery. "You'll feel differently when you have kids" you are told, with the assumption being that the maternal instinct will drive all other concerns from your body, or at least make you realise the futility of doing anything other than nurture. Politicians appear to assume that there is a monolithic group called "mothers" who all feel exactly the same about some things – health care, schools, maternity leave – and don't really have opinions on topics such as finance, international relations or defence. All the assumptions that have always been made

about women's lack of interest in public affairs are increased four-fold when they become mothers.

And in many ways this is true – women often do think about things differently once they become mothers. Becoming a mother is a major life event, which is accompanied by significant changes: in the way that we and others perceive our bodies and our role in society and in our social connections. But mothers don't stop thinking. Much is made of women's ability to "multi-task" – for mothers this is assumed to mean the ability to empty a washing machine at the same time as refereeing a fight between two toddlers. However, this ability to think and do at the same time means that women are perfectly able to be parents and want to discuss affairs of state. This book is about one of the places where women talk about politics, and where politicians seek to talk to them.

It is about the phenomenon known as Mumsnet – a website aimed at parents (although its name betrays the fact that the vast majority of users are women, if not mothers). Established in 2000 by a sports journalist and TV producer who met at antenatal classes, the stated aim of the site is to **"**To make parents' lives easier by pooling knowledge and experience"**.** It is now the largest parenting website in the UK and claims around 10 million unique visitors per month, clocking up around 100 million page views. It has a network of over 10,000 influencers and its Mumsnet Jobs site, focused on flexible working opportunities, has nearly 30k monthly users. In November 2019, its talk boards reached one billion page views and Justine Roberts' Boxing Day roundup email to site subscribers revealed that 43,556,451 words are written on the talk boards each month. The site has been described as an "internet phenomenon" (*The Daily Telegraph*), "a virtual shoulder to lean on" (*The Observer*) and – with an interesting use of gendered language – the 'daddy' of all parenting sites (*The Times*).

As a business, Mumsnet is a private limited company funded mainly by advertising. The site states that its overarching aim is not the pursuit of profits, and that it tries to conduct business in an ethical manner. For that reason, it does not accept advertising from a number of companies, including Nestlé, because of what Mumsnet calls its aggressive marketing of formula milk in breach of international standards, and for a number of products such as cosmetic surgery and gambling. In 2018 the site had a revenue of £8.6 million. Of the two original founders, Carrie Longton stepped down as a Director in 2018 while Justine Roberts is now Chief Executive. Roberts is married to

journalist Ian Katz, previously deputy editor of *The Guardian* and editor of *Newsnight,* who became Director of Programmes at Channel 4 in 2018. Mumsnet headquarters – referred to on the site as Mumsnet HQ – is in Kentish Town, London. The site employs over one hundred members of staff, including paid moderators who monitor what is said on the site. However, these are post-moderators, which means that comments are not pre-vetted. Instead they are investigated and potentially removed when they are reported to HQ. Mumsnet relies on its users to report posts that break its guidelines. A sister site for older women, Gransnet, was established in 2011.

There is nothing new about researching Mumsnet – there is a plethora of academic books and articles available that use Mumsnet, and other parenting sites, as a source of data to explore a great number of different aspects of digital parenting. The majority of these, however, focus on the conceptualisation and performance of modern motherhood on the site, with Mumsnet positioned as a supportive (or less than supportive) online community that, wittingly or unwittingly, supports the construction of a neoliberal and consumerist motherhood. Researchers point to the site's predominantly middle-class nature and its high proportion of university education and economically privileged mothers. For example, the neoliberal nature of Mumsnet is identified by Gambles (2010). She describes the site as both a popular cultural representation of parenting and an invitation to participate in public parenting in a society in which parents are held to be more responsible than ever before for their children's economic, social and educational success. For such middle-class mothers, the upbringing of their children is approached as a serious project. Both she and Jensen (2013) argue that, on Mumsnet, the focus is on an individual approach to problems rather than any wider social or political contexts and that, while the site is a place where women can vent about the impossible demands of contemporary intensive parenting, this is often done in ways that collude with neoliberal parenting culture. McRobbie (2013) describes Mumsnet as embodying professional middle-class maternity and having achieved the status of a mothers' lobby. In her excellent discussion of the symbiotic relationship between neoliberalism and liberal feminism, she argues that contemporary feminine mass media, which she identifies as including BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour*, the *Femail* section of the *Daily Mail*, the lifestyle pages of

broadsheets such as *The Times* and *The Guardian,* television programmes such as *Loose Women*, women's magazines*,* plus websites such as Mumsnet, are places where this "weak version of feminism" is allowed to flourish and where the professional middle-class mother is exalted as the ideal. She argues that, within such media, and also in centrist Conservative and "New Labour" politics, "leaning in" professional middle-class mothers are exhorted to act as the managers of their own families' journeys through a widely disseminated discourse that celebrates choice, for example to be a stay-at-home mother, and the privatisation of childcare, rather than the old-school feminist socialist goals of improving welfare support for working-class mothers and pre-school nursery provision for all.

Many of the accusations thrown at Mumsnet by McRobbie and others continue to be true today. Mumsnet is dominated by middle-class mothers; there is a focus on consumerism on its talk boards, whether that is the purchase of the right pram or the right outfit for the beach; and many of the discussions relating to women's place in the world focus on issues that impact professional middle-class women rather than their working-class sisters. The raising of children is certainly seen as a project at which parents, but especially mothers, and most especially stay-at-home mothers, must be seen as succeeding. However, certain other things have changed since 2013, and there are definitely sections of Mumsnet that now reject some aspects of liberal feminism and engage in a more radical approach to both politics and feminism. This is particularly true in relation to the debate around the UK and Scottish governments' proposed reforms of the Gender Recognition Act 2004 and related questions around the growing number of children, especially girls, who are being referred to gender identity services, and the inclusion of trans people, mostly trans women, in women's sports. While Mumsnet continues to be accused of being the "smug Mumsnet mafia" by some sections of the media (Janet Street-Porter, *Daily Mail* 15 February 2010), other accusations are also frequently thrown at the site, in particular that it is "a breeding ground for transphobic voices" (Hannah Woodhead, Huckmag.com 30 April 2018). For some, Mumsnet is now the home of out-of-touch older women who are "on the wrong side of history" and who are desperately fighting the achievement of equality for trans people for out-dated, right-wing and outright transphobic motives. For others, Mumsnet is one of the last bastions of free speech online, offering a place where those who wish to fight for women's rights can regroup and support the activities of offline radical feminist

campaigners and politicians. At the same time, Mumsnet continues to be seen as an important site that can facilitate the engagement of politicians of all parties with key floating voters – women.

There is nothing new about mothers wanting a space to discuss politics and current affairs. In 1960, journalist Betty Jerman wrote a piece for *The Guardian*'s women's page in which she shared her boredom at living in the suburbs with her family. While her husband commuted into the city, Jerman found herself "bored witless" – particularly with the lack of stimulating conversation. She blamed the women around her: "Home and childminding can have a blunting effect on a woman's mind" (*The Guardian* 27 February 2020). Letters poured in from women responding to the piece. One respondent, Maureen Nicol, suggested that housebound wives with liberal interests and a desire to remain individuals could form a national register. She was bombarded with letters from women wishing to join and so set up the Housebound Wives' Register, which soon had two thousand members. In 1966 the Register changed its name to the National Housewives' Register and the National Women's Register in 1987. Women started to meet in local groups and the organisation became a home for educated, mostly liberal women, who wanted to meet up to discuss things that were not related to their children or housework. It was a forerunner of Mumsnet.

Full disclosure – I am a Mumsnetter. I have been a Mumsnetter since 2002 when, pregnant with my second child, I was recommended the site by a colleague at work. I was urged to sign up to Mumsnet to access emails that would update me on the development of my foetus on a weekly basis. It was not long, however, before I discovered the site's discussion boards, and from then on I was an addict.

I would describe myself as more of a lurker than a poster, although over the course of nearly two decades have probably posted more than I think. Mumsnet has become a source of wisdom on various points in my house – sometimes even called on as the final arbiter, for example on the vexed question of teenagers and pocket money (Mumsnet ruled in the teenager's favour, much to my chagrin). One of my posts even appears in one of the *Mumsnet on…* books that have been published over the years on a variety of subjects from babies to teens – a mild claim to fame.

I am also a researcher on the subject of women and the media and have published extensively on Mumsnet. The great thing about studying and teaching the media is that you can claim all sorts of activities as "research" –*The Great British Bake Off*, the purchase of *Closer* and the ability to quote large chunks of *When Harry Met Sally*. Similarly, when my head of department kept finding me on Mumsnet, it was simpler to explain that I was writing a conference paper than admit to using it to discover a sure-fire way to make a toddler stay in his cot. Over the last two decades I have written about why women use Mumsnet, the discussion of sex on Mumsnet, men on Mumsnet, gendered communication styles on Mumsnet and the Mumsnet opinion of Trump. I have talked about Mumsnet on panels and at conferences and even managed to parley my interest in the website into a visiting fellowship at an Australian university. The plan was to compare the UK Mumsnet to its Australian counterpart until I found that Mumsnet is unique. There is no Australian or American equivalent of a website that is ostensibly about parenting but actually is about so much more than that, and used by women of all ages, not just those with young children. That's why Mumsnet attracts users from all over the world (and some men).

My interest in (obsession with?) Mumsnet has accompanied me on holidays and at Christmas, which every true Mumsnetter knows should be spent in your Christmas pyjamas and without your in-laws. I once sat inside on a holiday in the south of France, desperately clinging on to a dodgy internet connection, refreshing the screen on an old lap top in order to keep up with the scandal that was Gina Ford's libel action against Mumsnet over comments made about her on the site (https://www.mumsnet.com/archive/gina-ford/gina-settlement-press). In response to Ford's action, Mumsnet took the desperate decision to ban all mention of Ford's name, leading users to come up with the Harry Potter inspired "She Who Must Not Be Named".

Outside Mumsnet, I research and publish on press coverage of the women's suffrage campaign, particularly in Scotland, where I am based. For those somewhat puzzled about such apparently disparate interests, it took time to formulate the answer that I am interested in women's use of media to discuss political issues, whether that was in the Edwardian press or online on Mumsnet. My original PhD thesis investigated women's use of the letters to the editor columns in the daily press in Edwardian Scotland to contribute to public discussion of a variety of topics, some related to politics,

some not. For many of these women correspondents, their letter to the local newspaper was their first hesitant step into a public sphere dominated by men. Frequently, these correspondents used pen names, particularly maternal ones such as "A mother", to justify their entrance into the world of politics. As a mother, they could claim the right to a voice on issues such as the state of the roads in their town, the price of milk or the quality of local schools. The braver ones used this opportunity to offer their opinion on the local MP or even to assert their support for the suffragettes. When some women over the age of 30 were given the vote in 1918, politicians and their agents took to these same newspaper columns to woo the new female voter and claim to listen to her opinions on political matters. At the same time, ex-suffrage campaigners urged women to consider their own needs and to use their vote wisely.

During my decades-long lurk on Mumsnet it has been clear to me that such online sites offer women similar opportunities to join the public sphere and share their opinions on issues that matter to them, to attempt to change minds or educate and – on occasion – to make their points directly to politicians. As I comment throughout the book, I see so many connections between the discussion of politics on Mumsnet and that of earlier groups of mothers – not just the suffragettes, but those women who started the National Women's Register so that they could meet up to talk about things that were not their children. Or the women who joined housewives' organisations, such as the Women's Institutes and Townswomen's Guilds, and campaigned on issues that were important to them, such as state support for mothers and better health services.

This book is titled the *Politicization of Mumsnet* because I suggest that Mumsnet has become increasingly politicized over its two decades of existence because of both internal and external forces. As it has grown in numbers, it has grown in perceived power with a key group of floating voters – middle-class women. Thus Mumsnet and Mumsnetters have been wooed by politicians. The 2010 election was even described as "the Mumsnet election". But how real is this political power of Mumsnet? Can the much-hyped webchats with politicians actually change minds – of either Mumsnetters or ministers?

This book aims to investigate the role of politics on Mumsnet today, including how politicians try to use Mumsnet as a gateway to that key floating voter demographic of middle-class mothers, and how Mumsnetters themselves discuss politics. I am using

"politics" with a small p here, to widen the discussion beyond party politics and to include many issues relating to everyday life. For Mumsnet, that includes the growing discussion of feminism on the site. Mumsnetters who post on the Feminism topic or use feminist ideas and terminology to discuss their situation are women who have benefited throughout their lives from the changes brought about by Second Wave feminism and see no reason to adapt to more traditional values just because they have had a baby. Indeed, many find feminism more relevant to their lives than ever before after having children because of the changes in their own circumstances in a society where motherhood still impacts negatively on a woman's career and earning potential, and because of a new appreciation of society as a place in which they are raising children. To put it in more explicitly feminist terms: women's oppression is innately connected to our ability to reproduce. However, exposure to feminism on Mumsnet also seems to have an impact, raising their consciousness about women's rights and feminist issues. A July 2013 survey of more than 2000 Mumsnet users found that, while 47% considered themselves to be feminist before using the site, the proportion rose to 59% amongst members (Cochrane 2013). And this feminist tinge has become a Unique Selling Point (USP) for the site, meaning that members are not just there for the tips on weaning or recommendations of nappy brands. As one Mumsnet poster put it succinctly, "I came for the babies, stayed for the feminism" ("pocketsofsedition").

Janet Smithson and I first identified a growing feminist voice on Mumsnet in our study of communication styles on the site in 2013, in our article entitled "Mothers with Attitude" (Pedersen and Smithson 2013). At this point we noted the explicit discussion of feminism and support for political action on some sections of the site, which had been further stimulated by the introduction of a feminism topic on the Mumsnet talk boards in 2010. Some of the threads on this topic were openly proselytizing, with recommendations of books and blogs to read and discussions about what feminism can offer contemporary women. Other threads looked for advice and support for particular campaigns, for example against the establishment of lap-dancing clubs. However, we also noted that, whilst there were threads on feminism and campaigns against padded bikinis for seven year-olds, these were only a small minority in comparison to Mumsnet threads on celebrities, clothes, baby names and pushchairs. The feminism topic is only one amongst many, and at that time tended to be used by the same small group of vocal

posters. Nonetheless, we argued that Mumsnet had more explicit feminist discussion than other popular parenting sites. We also noted that the use of feminist terminology and arguments could be found outside the feminist topic, for example when discussing issues such as equality in housekeeping, equal opportunities in work and sex roles. A June 2011 thread asking "What was the moment you realised the Mumsnet Feminism thread was affecting the way you think" received answers covering subjects such as negative responses to magazine covers, discussing the concept of the patriarchy at coffee mornings, using the Bechdel Test to rate films, and changing the gender of storybook characters when reading to children.

The discussion of politics and feminism on Mumsnet has only grown stronger since our article was published in 2013, reflecting a wider interest in feminism and women's rights both on and offline. So-called "fourth-wave feminism" is increasingly digital, uniting women across the globe, and the Internet has offered a place for women to unite to call out sexism and fight against inequality. Hashtags such as #MeToo and #TimesUp have allowed women to share their experiences and call out misogyny at both a local and international level. However, as Kim Barker and Olga Jurasz (2019) point out in their survey of online misogyny, at the same time online spaces and platforms have become notoriously hostile places for women who dare to speak out, particularly on issues related to feminism. They identify a growing global phenomenon of online violence against women in politics and suggest that social media often acts as an echo chamber for those with anti-feminist agendas and opinions. In 2018 a study by Amnesty International and Element AI found that 1.1 million abusive or problematic tweets were sent to women journalists and politicians in the UK and the US the previous year – an average of one every 30 seconds, with women of colour disproportionately targeted.

Do women-dominated sites such as Mumsnet therefore offer a safe space for women to discuss their rights? Mumsnet has a growing reputation for both feminist discussion and action. But not all approve of what it has become. Mumsnetters' discussion of politics and politicians is frequently trivialised in the media – we will see the mockery associated with the "biscuit question" in Mumsnet's webchats with politicians in a subsequent chapter. However, the discussion of women's rights on the platform has also led to criticism and attacks. In 2012 Fathers for Justice campaigned against Mumsnet's

alleged anti-male agenda, including a naked protest at Marks & Spencer, one of Mumsnet's advertisers. In 2015 Justine Roberts, the founder of Mumsnet, had an armed police security team sent to her house as part of a "swatting attack". A swatting attack, also called "assault by proxy", involves a call to the police reporting a crime at the victim's home in the hope that armed police will be sent there. Roberts and another Mumsnet user were the first British victims of this type of attack and, while Roberts was away from home on the night in question, the other user found her husband arrested and handcuffed and police sweeping her house in front of her two young sons. @DadSecurity claimed responsibility for this and a distributed denial of service (DDosS)[1] attack on Mumsnet in the same week. The existence of a female-dominated website capable of discussing issues of public affairs as well as nappies and weaning continues to enrage some sections of the public.

In recent years, Mumsnet has been particularly attacked for what is perceived by trans-rights activists to be a transphobic culture, particularly on its women's rights and feminist discussion boards, thus parting company with some sections of feminism. It has been denounced as a "toxic hotbed of transphobia" (Livingston, *Vice*, 2018) while Edie Miller wrote on *The Outline* in 2018 that "Mumsnet is to British transphobia more like what 4Chan is to American fascism". On the other hand, Mumsnet is celebrated by gender-critical feminists and free-speech activists for its refusal to ban discussion of transgenderism. The boards attract activists and others who have been banned from social media such as Twitter, and Mumsnetters have also initiated and become involved in campaigns such as "Man Friday", where women declare themselves to be male for the day in order to gain access to men-only spaces. Those who champion the discussion of the impact of the campaign for increasing transgender rights on existing women's rights on Mumsnet suggest that mothers in particular are affected by the trend in public discourse to be trans-inclusive when speaking of "pregnant people" and "chest feeders" rather mothers and breast-feeding. Transgenderism is a controversial subject in academia, but it is becoming increasing important to investigate how it is discussed online. Some limited discussion of this subject has already been undertaken. Within this literature, Mumsnet's role as a home for gender-critical discussion tends to be name-

[1] The intentional paralysing of a computer network by flooding it with data sent simultaneously from many individual computers.

checked rather than investigated. I was particularly struck by Imbrišević's (n.d.) description of a "war over words being waged between radical or gender critical feminists (but also members of Mumsnet and other groups/individuals)", which did not even give Mumsnetters the agency of gender-critical feminists but instead positioned them on the sidelines.

My discussion will be framed by the concept of Mumsnet as a subaltern counterpublic, within which the formation and enactment of an alternative public is undertaken. Nancy Fraser (1990) argues that "subaltern counterpublics" are formed in parallel and as a response to exclusion from the dominant public sphere, and are places where members can invent and circulate counter discourses in order to "formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs" (Fraser, 1992, p. 123). I argue that the feminism talkboards of Mumsnet allow gender-critical women, who have been alienated from the dominant public sphere because of their beliefs that differentiate between the biological basis of sex and the social construct of gender, and concerns about the impact of a move to uncritical acceptance of gender self-identification on the rights of women and girls, to form an alternative public sphere. Within this they can support each other, circulate counter discourses to those in the dominant public sphere and plan agitational activities, which can occur both on and offline. However, I also note that this is a subaltern counterpublic with limitations because – although all are welcome to join in the discussion on Mumsnet, it is a website that is moderated by its owners. These owners have to balance the needs of all its users – including those who feel unhappy at the dominance of the trans debate on its feminism boards – and are also aware of the requirements of its major source of funding – advertisers. Hence the suggestion that, even on Mumsnet, the provision of a subaltern public sphere within which to discuss issues of note, is limited and increasingly controlled because of pressures from both within and outwith the site.

I also suggest that the Feminism talk boards on Mumsnet are characterised by a feeling of being let down – many of the posters express their frustrations with politicians and the media, particularly on the left. On the subject of the potential impact of trans rights on women's rights, they feel let down by institutions, such as political parties, publicly funded bodies, newspapers and women's organisations, that they have always felt supported by, and have always supported. These include left-wing and centrist political

parties, *The Guardian*, the Women's Equality Party and publicly funded organisations, who are seen to have either tried to avoid the issues raised or actually moved against gender-critical women. So these women have taken matters into their own hands.

An editorial point: I have taken the decision to use the pen names of those Mumsnetters who are quoted in this book and also reproduce the quotes as written. I do this on the grounds that Mumsnet is eminently searchable and even a quick google of some of the quotes would take you directly to the thread in question. Mumsnetters choose to hide their identities behind pen names, many of which – just like the Edwardian correspondents to daily newspapers – carry their own message. The message can be just as much in the name as in the post. Mumsnet's use of pen names rather than real names is also important – as Amy Binns (2017) points out, early cyberspace was created by white, privileged men. Facebook's insistence on real names is clearly the product of people who have never been forced to hide. I also wish to acknowledge my sources and to be as transparent as possible about where the material quoted in this book comes from.

One other point, this book was written in late 2019 to early 2020. This period in politics offered particular problems with reference to politicians and their shifting allegiances to political parties (which is a bit of an understatement). I have tried to offset this by making reference to politicians' political affiliations as they were at the time that the events described took place.

Chapter 2: Women and political debate

Traditional research into political participation suggests that women are less interested, less politically informed and also participate less in politics than men (Vochocová 2018). This is usually assumed to be the result of the historical exclusion of women from the public sphere. While these gender differences have reduced offline, with more women becoming politically active, women continue to be marginalised in the digital world. One reason suggested for this is that women and men use the Internet for different reasons, with women more interested in building relationships rather than becoming involved in the often aggressive and conflict-ridden discussion of politics online. However, it is clearly also because so many women find themselves ridiculed, trivialised and the recipients of aggressive personal attacks by male social-media users when they attempt to join in political discussions on sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

As Binns (2017) and many others have pointed out, cyberspace was built by male creators, with a particular bias in Silicon Valley towards men who struggled with social communication offline, particularly with women. This has resulted in many online environments being hostile places for women. Women who blog about politics or identify as feminist face not only risks of online abuse but also stalking, trolls, rape threats, death threats and unpleasant offline encounters (Eckert 2018). In 2018, Amnesty International accused Twitter of failing to "adequately respect human rights and effectively tackle violence and abuse on the platform," which meant that "instead of women using their voices *'to impact the world*', many women are instead being pushed backwards to a culture of silence." Case studies in its report included the politicians Ruth Davidson, Diane Abbott and Nicola Sturgeon and Laura Bates of the Everyday Sexism project. When Labour MP Jess Phillips launched the campaign "Reclaim the Internet" she received 6000 abusive messages on Twitter in 36 hours. She installed a panic room at her office and increased security in her home after receiving death threats. In 2018, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women stated that the aim of violence against women in politics, much of which is increasingly online, is to preserve traditional gender roles and stereotypes and to maintain structural and gender-based inequalities. In comparison to male politicians, the abuse of female politicians focuses on them as women rather than criticizing their political views or

policies. This type of abuse is often also trivialised as "banter" which women should simply bear if they wish to participate online (Barker and Jurasz 2019).

As I have argued elsewhere, Mumsnet differs from other online parenting communities in its toleration of flaming and swearing. Posters use strong assertions, put-downs and sarcasm – the type of communication style that has been identified by some scholars (for example Herring 1996) as male. They also enjoy talking about politics. Some of them *really* enjoy talking about politics. I argue that Mumsnetters use the freedom of being in a female-dominated online community to adopt what have previously been identified as male-gendered styles of computer-mediated communication, such as flaming, swearing and aggression. Indeed, we can go further, and suggest that it is the much smaller group of male Mumsnetters who act in what has been identified as stereotypically female ways online: adapting their behaviour to fit in with dominant norms, trying not to draw attention to their gender for fear of being attacked, and paying attention to the way they post in order to fit in (Pedersen 2015).

Particular groups of Mumsnetters are just as absorbed by political going-ons at Westminster or in the White House as any political journalist at Channel 4. There are long-running series of threads, for example, on the subjects of the Trump presidency and Brexit, where posters share information, opinion, and – in particular – criticism of the UK and US governments. As far as Brexit is concerned, the Mumsnet forum has allowed space for both sides of the argument. The group calling themselves "Westminsterenders" have run a series of fast-moving and critical threads since the Brexit referendum, whilst the less-frequent "Brexit Arms" threads offer a shelter for those who support Brexit and often find themselves attacked on the wider forum.

Simon Burnett and I analysed several of the early Trump threads in 2017 in our investigation of political discussion on Mumsnet. We argue that users of the site demonstrate what we call "citizen curation" in the way in which they share and evaluate sources of information. In seeking to share the latest information about Trump, his policies and his administration, posters collaborate to source, present and curate information from a variety of news sources on their topic of interest. However, like citizen journalists, they also demonstrate a subjectivity in their discussion of Trump (they don't like him) and also in their judgements about the veracity of different sources, imposing a clear hierarchy. Thus information garnered from mainstream,

liberal-leaning news sources, whether British or from overseas, is given the highest level of trust, and is often used to support information from other sources, which are seen as less trustworthy. Information can also be shared from conservative-leaning news sources, for example the *Daily Mail* or even a source such as Breitbart, but only when it supports the overall anti-Trump tone of the discussion on these threads. The choice of stories to share is thus driven more by criticism of Trump than by political affiliation and, in fact, right-wing news sources that criticise Trump are in many ways given more credibility by posters. Thus, when discussing Trump's travel ban on refugees entering the US in early 2017, "M0stlyHet" reported "I just checked out the Mail's website to see how the right wing rags are covering this – you know Trump's gone way, way over the mark when even the coverage in the Mail is uniformly negative."

Posters also work collaboratively to verify news items, spending time and effort searching the Internet to find multiple sources on particular stories, including non-media sources such as government websites and the Twitter feeds of government departments, politicians and journalists. In the threads we analysed, tweets discussed included those of Justin Trudeau, Betsy deVos, the Mayor of Boston, the governor of New York, J. K. Rowling, Kim Kardashian and the Swedish Foreign Ministry. Posters are also proud of their ability to "scoop" the mainstream news media on occasion, noting that they rely on the threads rather than the mainstream news media to keep them up to date with the news. "Love this thread – breaking Trump news before Sky/BBC!". The activity of those on these political threads also crosses over into real life, such as participating in marches and other events against Brexit, writing letters to politicians and even discussing the possibility of standing for political office themselves.

The female floating voter

The general election of 2010 was named "the Mumsnet election" by certain sections of the press – referencing the high-profile wooing of the Mumsnet vote by leaders of all the main parties. But in fact politicians have been conducting webchats on Mumsnet ever since David Cameron's appearance in 2006 on his return from paternity leave. Over one hundred webchats have been undertaken by politicians since that time, in the belief that

direct contact with Mumsnetters will lead to positive publicity and potentially a boost in the polls.

An appearance on a popular internet site also offers politicians the ability to circumvent the gatekeepers of the mainstream news media and speak directly to voters without being edited or cut off by an interviewer. Hence Nigel Farage's request to be given a webchat on a site that would seem to be mostly hostile to his views in 2011 when he was leader of UKIP. Similarly, on being asked how he hoped to deal with "smears" during his campaign for London mayor in 2012, Ken Livingstone responded: "by coming on Mumsnet, doing TV debates and answering questions honestly". Webchat politicians also get to choose which questions to answer and which to avoid, although, as we will see, avoiding contentious questions can backfire. At a time when many are losing trust in politics, the use of social media can allow individual politicians to communicate their own persona and beliefs directly to constituents and the wider public. Such personalised campaigning can also allow them to indicate differences of opinion with party policy or leadership, and to shift the emphasis onto their own personality.

One of the reasons for the apparent popularity of Mumsnet webchats amongst politicians during general election campaigns is the suggestion that women are key floating voters and more likely to make their minds up about who to vote for during a campaign. This is borne out by the British Election Study team's analysis of men and women's voting during the 2017 General Election, which suggests that women are less decided in their vote choice and more likely to be influenced by campaigning during a general election. There has been no significant gender gap in turnout at general elections since 2001, although men were slightly more likely to vote in the EU Referendum in 2016 and more likely to vote Leave than Remain (Ipsos-Mori 2016). Women were just as likely as men to turn out for the General Elections of 2015 and 2017 – but were more likely to be undecided voters until the last minute.

I use the term "woo" advisedly. Yates (2010) argues that flirtation has become a strategy within modern political communication, and in particular when dealing with floating voters – the majority of whom are women. Indeed, floating voters can be argued to be flirts themselves, with their apparent lack of commitment to one party. Yates identifies Tony Blair's skills at courting voters and warding off their latent aggression as particularly pivotal in this new formation of hegemonic political masculinity, in which

he exuded a likeable and authentic persona whilst flirting to camera. Van Zoonen (2006) also identifies Blair and David Cameron as able to present authentic, alpha male but caring, celebrity personas in contrast, for example, to Gordon Brown and the majority of female politicians. Yates specifically mentions Cameron and Brown's appearances on Mumsnet as attempts to use their fatherhood to signify masculinity and authenticity whilst also appealing to Mumsnetters as mothers, although it might be suggested that Cameron was more successful in this than Brown.

Women-friendly politics

Political parties have long been criticised for considering the female voter only at election time, when "women friendly" policies on issues such as childcare, work–life balance and the quality of maternity services are produced. These might even be presented on a "woman-friendly" platform such as the pink minibus used for Labour's "Woman to Woman" tour of the UK in 2015. Labour women politicians were driven around marginal constituencies to talk to women "at their kitchen tables" in an effort to win their votes. The pinkness of a bus aimed at female voters was, understandably, controversial. Whilst Harriet Harman chose to argue that the colour of the bus was actually magenta, Yvette Cooper, who dropped in for a Mumsnet webchat during the campaign, agreed that the bus was pink. The launch of the bus led to a number of jokes about Barbie and women drivers – not helped by Mumsnet's post of a photograph of the clearly dented end of a (pink) bus outside its headquarters. Harman argued that the value of the roadshow was to show women that politics is not just for men. However, suggestions that women will be found in the kitchen and will be attracted by the colour pink, plus a focus on so-called "family-friendly" polices, gives the strong impression that political parties don't think women voters are interested in issues outside the home, such as defence spending or international affairs. Women voters also tend to be perceived as one homogenous mass, despite the fact that, just like men, women can be found supporting every political party and point of view.

The history of the “woman’s vote”

The idea that women focus solely on issues relating to the home and their children, and do not want to bother their pretty little heads about wider public affairs, has a long history. This division of the world into the public (male) and private (female) spheres was one of the key arguments against giving women the parliamentary vote in the first place. It was assumed by many Victorian and Edwardian commentators that women were both not interested in, and not capable of understanding, complex affairs of state and therefore they should trust men to take care of political issues for them. Women were perceived as fragile creatures, best suited to domesticity, who would be sullied by exposure to the world of politics. Their minds were not as able to grasp complex issues as those of men, being smaller. There was also some concern that, if women were given a vote, wives would merely vote as directed by their husband or daughters as directed by their father, and therefore women would “waste” their vote.

To a certain extent, this division of the world into male and female spheres was also supported by those who argued for women’s suffrage. Both suffragists and suffragettes argued that women would bring a particularly feminine approach to public affairs *because* of their role as mothers and wives. Women’s understanding of issues such as domestic economy, sick nursing and bringing up children would enable them to contribute a uniquely female perspective to government debate on policies relating to health, the economy and childcare. Militant suffragette organisations even produced postcards showing their leaders cooking in their own kitchens or bathing their babies to emphasise their maternal instincts and femininity.

While some women over the age of 30 achieved the parliamentary vote in the UK in 1918, and all women over the age 21 achieved the vote in 1928, the connection between women and a certain set of “womanly” abilities continued. The women pioneers in the House of Commons, such as the Conservative MP Nancy Astor and the Liberal party’s Margaret Wintringham, were expected to represent not just their constituents but all women, whether they had voted for them or not. Despite being from different parties, the two became good friends and often worked together to promote policies that would benefit women and children. They also suffered aggression from colleagues and the type of press commentary and intrusion over their home lives and appearance that would be very familiar to contemporary women politicians. When Nancy Astor first arrived in the

Chamber of the House of Commons, she had to push past jeering male MPs who tried to block her way. She was also excluded from dining rooms and other facilities, and the nearest ladies' toilet was a long way from the Chamber. During the 1920s, all women MPs, of whatever party, had to share one office, the "Lady Members' Room" – a small room in the basement dubbed "The Tomb". It is perhaps not surprising then that they often collaborated on policies aimed at ameliorating the situation of women and children.

Over the years, women's so-called "softer" skills have often been cited as reasons to give them responsibility for departments relating to health or children rather than, for example, the Treasury. In 2017 – almost one hundred years after women become eligible to stand for Parliament – Kirsty Blackman, SNP MP, became the first woman ever to lead her party on the economy in the House of Commons. At the time of going to press there still has not been a female Chancellor of the Exchequer, although Kate Forbes MSP was promoted to Finance Secretary in the Scottish Parliament in February 2020. Her promotion came after her delivery of the Scottish government budget hours after Finance Secretary Derek Mackay was forced to step down from the role after allegations were made of inappropriate texting with a 16 year-old boy. This may be an excellent example of the so-called "glass cliff", where women are more likely to achieve leadership roles during periods of crisis, when the chance of failure is higher – see also the appointment of Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir as Prime Minister of Iceland in 2009 immediately after the financial crisis, and indeed the rise of Theresa May after the Brexit Referendum.

Women politicians and motherhood

The suffragettes' photographs of their leaders bathing babies and their focus on the feminine difference women could bring to politics has had some unfortunate consequences for their descendants in political leadership. Women politicians are caught between a rock and a hard place as far as motherhood is concerned. If they are mothers, there are suggestions that they will be unable to pull themselves away from their children to fully concentrate on the political task at hand. They are also suspected of not being "serious enough" about their political career, in a way that no political

father is. If they do not have children, they are deemed to have, Lady Macbeth-like, unsexed themselves through ambition and turned their back on their natural instincts. Consider the insinuations made about the childless Theresa May by Andrea Leadsom, her rival in the 2017 Conservative party leadership race, who suggested that her role as a mother gave her more of a stake in the future. Or Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, forced to admit to suffering miscarriages in order to silence continual comments about her childlessness. A controversial *New Statesman* cover of July 2015 showed Sturgeon, Angela Merkel, Theresa May and Labour leadership candidate Liz Kendall all staring into a cradle, empty apart from a ballot box, illustrating a story entitled "The motherhood trap" which asked why so many senior women politicians were childless.

In comparison, the fatherhood of male politicians can add to their image as both the "father" of the nation and a nurturing, compassionate and virile leader. Consider the positive response to the new babies fathered in office by incumbent Prime Ministers Tony Blair and David Cameron. Boris Johnson's announcement of the incipient birth of his first child with Carrie Symonds in spring 2020 was met with mixed emotions and accusations that the announcement was used to shift public attention away from more pressing problems for the government. Tabloids like the *Mirror* used the opportunity to calculate that the baby may have been conceived on the "very special occasion" of Boris' first party conference as Prime Minister. There were no suggestions that Johnson would be distracted by the baby or his paternal feelings and be unable to do the job of prime minster, although it must be admitted that, with an unspecified number of children, his is a special case. While Jacinda Ardern has broken new ground in New Zealand by having a baby while working as leader of her country, in Europe it is necessary for her children to be grown up or better yet non-existent before a woman can be seen as the mother of the nation. The childless Angela Merkel is referred to affectionately as the "Mutti" of Germany while Finnish president Tarja Halonen was called 'mother Finland' (van Zoonen 2006). Those women MPs who have given birth in office have highlighted the problems still enshrined in a "male as default" parliamentary system that did not offer basic maternity leave for MPs until 2019 and only allowed breastfeeding in the House of Commons Chamber in 2020. In 2019, Ruth Davidson stepped down from her role as leader of the Scottish Tories after the birth of her son stating that, in the face of a

potential general election, the possibility of spending too much time away from him filled her with dread.

In comparison to the lack of facilities for breast-feeding at Westminster, the breasts of female politicians are considered fair game for newspapers and male MPs alike. Diane Abbott told the BBC's Andrew Marr that male MPs would gesture as though they had breasts when women MPs spoke in the House of Commons. Journalist Toby Young tweeted querying the identity of the woman with "serious cleavage" who was sitting behind Labour party leader Ed Miliband during Prime Minister's Questions, while the *Daily Mail* focused on Home Secretary Theresa May's low-cut red dress on Budget Day 2016 with the headline "It's not just the economy plunging into the red!"

Comments about their breasts are of course only part of what women politicians have to endure. In November 2019, a comparatively high number of female MPs from all parties stepped down from politics at the announcement of a new general election. While male MPs also used this opportunity to retire from politics, it was striking how comparatively young the women MPs were – in the Conservative party, the female MPs stepping down were on average ten years younger, and had spent a decade less in parliament, than retiring male MPs. They included women who had only recently been seen as potential leaders of the party, such as cabinet minister Nicky Morgan and former Home Secretary Amber Rudd. Many of the women stepping down cited the abuse they had received as female politicians, including rape and death threats, and the pressure their life as an MP had put on family life. Some had been forced to wear panic alarms or to have them installed in their family homes. Much of the media commentary on the subject referenced the murder of Labour MP Jo Cox during the Brexit referendum campaign in 2016, and the opinion of many female MPs interviewed who felt that the nature of UK politics had become more abusive since the referendum. An Amnesty International study during the General Election of 2017 showed that black women MPs were particular targets – half of all abusive tweets that were sent to female MPs during the campaign had been sent to Labour shadow home secretary Diane Abbott. As well as threats of assassination, encouragements to commit suicide, and threats of bodily harm and murder, women MPs suffer a barrage of abuse via social media, which includes comments on their appearance and family situation. The Conservative MP Andrea Jenkyns told the BBC that she had received emails threatening to sexually mutilate her

and suicide-related graffiti at her constituency office, but "The ones that really get to me are the ones that call me a bad mother" (BBC November 2019).

Wooing the female vote

So the intermingling of motherhood and politics has a long and contentious history. Women are allowed to have political opinions on certain issues, mostly related to the care and education of children. They are also presumed to have very similar opinions on these issues and to act as a homogenous whole in a way that men rarely are. The "women's vote" becomes particularly important at election time because they are perceived to be key swing voters who can be romanced into voting for a particular party through intensive courting.

This is not new behaviour. Ever since women have had the vote, political parties have tried to woo them with special policies aimed at "mothers", "the housewife" or "working mums". When women first achieved the vote in 1918, all political parties developed policy programmes designed to be attractive to women because there was a firm belief that women would vote as a block and were concerned with different issues to men. However, once it became clear that women did not act in this way, the stream of "women friendly" polices disappeared (Campbell 2016). The 1960s and 70s, with the rise of second-wave feminism, also stimulated political parties to consider "women's issues", particularly as more women became involved as politicians themselves. In the 1990s, the key to the Labour party's success was described as "Worcester Woman" – a young, professional woman from middle England who was attracted to the party by the charms of Tony Blair. Similarly, the 2010 election was frequently described in the press as the "Mumsnet election," a term coined by Rachel Sylvester in *The Times* in November 2009, as all party leaders appeared on webchats on Mumsnet in order to woo these supposedly key floating voters. By May 2010, 43 articles in the press had used this term (Campbell 2016). The Labour party's campaign co-ordinator, Douglas Alexander, estimated that 400,000 young mothers from 100 marginal constituencies could determine the overall election result. He described these women as likely to be home-owners living in a household with children, in a small city or town, perhaps in the Midlands, in the new towns or the M1 corridor. They worked full-time and part-time, in

retail in particular (Harmer and Wring 2013). The parenting sites Mumsnet and Netmums were deemed useful portals through which such women could be reached and through which Labour could promote its "Sure Start" policy, which integrated services such as child care, health and education for the under-fives and other support services for parents. Similarly, the Conservative party wished to promote its reformed image and caring side through its leader David Cameron. Its party manifesto proclaimed the desire to "make Britain the most family-friendly country in Europe". These aims led to a bombardment of so-called family-friendly policies in the early weeks of the campaign and appearances on women's media, including Mumsnet.

However, the 2010 pre-election focus on women faded once the campaign intensified and attention turned to the (new and all-male) television debates between party leaders. Despite this much-vaunted emphasis on women's opinions on politics, female politicians were rarely seen in media coverage during the 2010 campaign, with commentators noting that it was the leader's wives rather than female politicians who were more likely to be granted media interviews. Gordon Brown's wife, Sarah, for example, also took part in a Mumsnet webchat and was revealed to be a registered user of the site. Rosie Campbell (2012) points out that the use of news-frames such as "the Mumsnet election" are useful ways of drawing attention to women's issues, but they are easily jettisoned when the news agenda moves on. She also notes that, after the election, the teams negotiating the coalition between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats contained no female key players and that women's issues dropped to the bottom of the agenda until a series of opinion polls showed that the coalition had a problem with women.